

JAN ASSMANN AND ANCIENT MONOTHEISM

A talk and dinner tonight with Jan Assmann, the great Egyptologist – the topic – ancient monotheism. Fascinating.

Jan Assmann tonight

I am particularly interested in the early genealogy of religion, part of my [Origins project](#).

What I came away with was Jan's distinction between [universalist and globalist monotheisms](#). The first centers upon an inherent deity and universal truth that is fundamentally exclusive. It is distinctively [unheimlich – uncanny](#) in its distance from the everyday and in its strangeness – the holy ghost in the machine, as it were. We are familiar with such a universalizing tendency in many exclusive and fundamentalist theologies and religions, even secular movements such as the scientific enlightenment and its legacy of one universal principle of reason.

The origins of ancient Near Eastern monotheism, in contrast, seem much more associated with a search to find a god that transcends local difference. Hence it was "globalist", in contrast to universalist.

There are many Near Eastern diplomatic documents that translate local deities, one into the other, and ultimately according to a single principle of deity. The purpose is to establish legal force through the validity of oaths sworn by god(s) with different names. There is a clear association of divinity, of course, also with monarchy. It is there in the difficult relations between temple, monarchy and state in the early city states of Mesopotamia and the Nile Valley.

With the divine cosmos intimately associated with political power, the most powerful is that which is uncreated, or rather *causa sui*, independent, not *subject* to another. Its genealogy runs from the god-king through the paradox of the king's two bodies to the still-current association of state and church. Monotheism allows

the ultimate global translation. Its roots are regional diversity, socio-political extension, international relations and sovereignty.

Some crucial matters here for our current fundamentalist clash of civilizations. Monotheism began as a transcendence of local difference, translating through a deity removed from the everyday.